# Guidelines for Wetlands Management in Ontario

Ontario

Ministry of Natural Resources

Hon. Alan W. Pope
Minister

John R. Sloan
Deputy Minister

# GUIDELINES FOR WETLAND MANAGEMENT IN ONTARIO

## Purpose:

These Guidelines represent the Province of Ontario's concern for wetlands and wetlands management. The purpose is to ensure that wetlands are managed in keeping with both present and long-term needs of the people of Ontario.

## Interpretation:

These guidelines do not supersede or take priority over other provincial planning policies, and recognizes that other matters, such as housing, forestry, agriculture, mining, watershed protection, tourism, recreation, environment, and the concerns of native people, must also receive consideration in land-use planning. Wetland management should be implemented in conjunction with relevant provincial policies and regulations.

## Definition:

For the purpose of these guidelines, wetlands are areas with shallow standing water, (less than 2 meters deep), until about July 1, in most years. They are divided into 4 major categories: swamps, marshes, bogs and fens.

## Background:

Wetlands are important to Ontario's economy. They maintain and improve water quality, help control flooding, provide habitat for fish and wildlife, and contribute substantial social and economic benefits. These include outdoor recreation and tourism benefits from such activities as hunting, fishing and bird-watching amounting to over 53 million user-days per year for 7 million residents. Wetlands also contribute to the ecological diversity of the landscape and provide habitat for several threatened and endangered species. They provide protection against flooding by holding rainfall during peak periods and releasing it over the following months. They are a source of many important resource products, such as fur, wood and wild rice, valued in excess of 300 million dollars annually. The benefits they provide and the overall provincial interest in wetlands should be taken into account in any related planning action.

## The Provincial Evaluation System

Individual wetlands will be identified and classified according to a standardized methodology contained in:

> *An Evaluation System for Wetlands of Ontario South of the Precambrian Shield.* Second Edition. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and the Canadian Wildlife Service. 1984. 153 pp.

## Principles:

The following principles form the basis of these Guidelines.

1. Wetlands are essential natural resources. When properly classified according to their function, wetlands can be managed for the maximum benefit of all residents of Ontario.
2. All land use planning and resource management agencies should recognize wetlands as important components of their comprehensive plans and programs, and have a responsibility to ensure their plans and actions consider all the benefits of wetlands when arriving at decisions.
3. All parts of Ontario possessing wetlands share a responsibility for their wise management.
4. The protection of wetlands should not interfere unreasonably with existing uses of private land either within the wetland or in surrounding areas.

## Application

The following guidelines apply to those wetlands identified and classified according to the provincial evaluation system as being of provincial significance (generally, Classes 1 and 2) and those additional wetland areas identified by municipalities as being significant and incorporated within their planning documents.

**1. General Guideline**

1.1 Every land-use planning and resource-management agency should have regard for the implications of its actions on wetlands within its management area.

1.2 All municipalities should ensure that official plans, by-laws and planning programs undertaken by their respective Council or by delegated authority have regard to these planning guidelines.

**2. Official Plans**

2.1 Wetlands identified as having significance should be protected from incompatible activities wherever possible.

2.2 Development in wetlands can occur under carefully considered circumstances where it can be shown that the wetland values can be managed adequately.

## 3. Zoning By-Laws

3.1 Lands identified in an official plan for protection as wetlands should be placed in a zoning category that only permits uses that are compatible with wetland management, such as forestry, aquaculture, fisheries management, wild rice, waterfowl production, and open space.

3.2 In municipalities not subject to an official plan, significant wetlands should be identified for protection on advice of the Ministry of Natural Resources and placed in a zoning category which prohibits uses that are incompatible with future existence of the wetland.

## 4. Implementation

The objective of the Government is to ensure optimum economic and social benefits are obtained from the land with minimal disturbance to remaining wetlands.

This can be achieved through implementation of these guidelines, including the following government functions.

4.1 The Government will:

a) provide on a priority basis all pertinent information, including mapping and technical assistance, to any government body or planning authority, in particular municipalities, and assist them to define and protect wetland areas; priority will be given to inventorying areas undergoing official plan preparation and review.

b) provide comments to planning review and approval agencies on proposed technical planning actions that may have implications for wetland development. Comments shall relate to the compliance of these actions with these guidelines and to wise resource management;

c) prepare technical documents to assist municipalities and other agencies responsible for wetland planning and management, in implementing this Guideline.

d) undertake research programs to investigate a wide array of wetland management topics. Special emphasis shall be given to managing wetlands for as wide an array of benefits to the people of Ontario as possible;

e) review and comment upon application of the evaluation system carried out by or on behalf of municipalities.

# AN EVALUATION SYSTEM FOR WETLANDS

Wetlands are land types that are commonly referred to as swamps, fens, mires, marshes, bogs, sloughs and peatlands. They occur intermittently across the landscape of southern Ontario along lakes, rivers, streams and in headwater areas. They vary in size from a fraction of a hectare to many thousands of hectares. They may be relatively simple or highly complex and diverse.

A system of evaluating wetlands was created for the purpose of measuring wetland values.[1] Its application is calculated to reveal not only which wetlands in an area, a region, or in southern Ontario as a whole are more valuable but also why one wetland is more valuable than another. It is intended to be used as a tool or instrument at various levels in Ontario's Planning Process. The ultimate aim is to be able to rate wetlands with regard to their relative value so that people who make decisions about land-use will have a means through which to ascertain which wetlands are the more valuable.

The need or "justification" for the development of this system of evaluation for Ontario's wetlands derives from several considerations. The greatest need stems from the fact that virtually no prior work had been done to quantify wetland values in a manner whch permits comparison of wetlands in order to make knowledgeable land use decisions. Another consideration derives from an increased scientific understanding of the role that many wetlands play in maintaining wildlife populations, regulating stream flow and in pollution abatement. Wetlands are truly unique areas where land and water come together, providing habitat for a diverse variety of wildlife species that can live nowhere else. Many people see wetlands as having special and unique recreational, educational and scientific value to themselves and to society as a whole. Yet, until now no mechanism has existed to identify which wetlands in a given area or region are the most important to society as a whole. The system of evaluation should meet this need.

Since the evaluation system was designed to identify and measure some of the most important values of wetlands in an unbiased manner, it should provide an accurate mechanism or framework through which conflicting claims about wetland values and uses can be resolved. By applying this system, knowledge of the different kinds of wetland values would become available for examination and assessment by an interested person, agency or group. Judgements about the best possible use of any wetland could then be made on the basis of relatively firm information. If insufficient information about the values of a particular wetland still exist, more could be obtained by individuals or groups. Decisions about future uses of a wetland can thus have a more rational basis.

The evaluation system can be applied to all Ontario wetlands south of the Canadian Shield. It should also be applicable to those wetlands in a band extending roughly between Haliburton and Leeds counties where significant calcareous drift overtops the Shield.

Implementation of the Evaluation System may take place at three levels.

(a) by a municipality, regional government or county as part of the Municipal Planning Process where often there is need for a mechanism to obtain some objective insights or knowledge into the value of a particular wetland in relation to other nearby wetlands;

(b) by Conservation Authorities as part of an overall watershed management plan, or by MNR Districts in relation to the need to develop wildlife and other resource management objectives or because of a need to contribute professional advice about wetlands during the development of Municipal Plans and review of drainage proposals; and

(c) by the province as an aid to broad planning. In this regard a wetlands evaluation system will serve as an essential cornerstone of a wetlands policy where there is need for an objective mechanism to identify the most valuable wetlands in the province. As well, the evaluation system will prove of value in identifying provincially or nationally important wetland habitat for migratory birds.

This evaluation system will therefore have both a short and a long term practical application and use to the people of Ontario.

The provincial evaluation system is used to evaluate wetlands and rank them into 7 classes. The classification is based on the following point scores:

Class 1 — 700 or more total points or 3 out of 4 components which score higher than 200 points each;

Class 2 — 650 or more total points or 2 out of 4 components which score higher than 200 points each;

Class 3 — 600 or more total points or 1 out of 4 components which scores higher than 200 points;

Class 4 — 550 or more total points or all 4 components scores above 100 points each;

Class 5 — 500 or more total points or 3 out of 4 components which score more than 100 points each;

Class 6 — 450 or more total points or 2 out 4 components which score more than 100 points each;

Class 7 — all others not included above.

---

[1] An Evaluation System for Wetlands of Ontario south of the Precambrian Shield. Second Edition. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and the Canadian Wildlife Service. 1984. 153 pp. (Available from Wildlife Branch, O.M.N.R., Queen's Park, Toronto, Ontario M7A 1W3.)